

Dance in Stage Management: The Intersection of an Embodied Education and
the Demanding Role of a Stage Manager

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Stage managers are the glue that holds performances together. They are responsible for the efficiency and success of the show as well as the well-being of the cast, crew, and anyone else involved in the production. With this though, comes certain skills that are necessary not only for success, but also for being an exceptional stage manager that is respected in the community of the performance. Everyone has a different training, and everyone learns these skills in a different way, but the foundation of skills that a dance training lays, I have found, is one of the most detailed training that enhances and strengthens a stage manager's abilities. When investigating the overlap between dancer and stage manager, although seemingly very different, you will find that many of the skills and expectations of a dancer, are either found in the requirements of being a stage manager or can be utilized to support and enrich their work in the theatre.

This research investigates how dance training can support stage managers and answers the questions of what makes an exceptional stage manager and how a background in dance can be integrated into the work of one, influencing their style of leadership as well as strengthening specific skills that are valuable. Through interviews with stage managers and dance educators including Kristin Colvin Young, Susan Hadley, Heather Olcott, Kasson Marroquin, Greg Catellier, Katie Houff, and Mariann Zennie, all with varying backgrounds and levels of dance training, I questioned this relationship of dancer and stage manager. In these interviews we discussed their level of training in dance and stage management, what they believe to make someone an exceptional stage manager, how dance training can support a stage manager, and how it comes through in their work. Those that had no dance training, discussed what skills they wish they had a better foundation for. In these conversations, I found a strong relationship

between the dancers moving into the role of stage manager, and them utilizing their training to help stand out and excel in their careers in ways that other training and paths may not provide.

In order to understand how a background in dance training can support a stage manager in their work in the theatre, you first need to understand what makes a stage manager successful as well as exceptional at what they do. There are some skills that are obvious to be a stage manager including: having great timing and rhythm, organization, people skills, exceptional communication, and time management and scheduling. Kristin Colvin Young, resident stage manager for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in New York City who also has a BFA in dance, says that part of being a successful stage manager is, “understanding the marriage between movement and music, or sound score and the lighting,” referencing to the importance of timing and rhythm. Being skilled in organization and communication are also vital to the success of a stage manager. Susan Hadley, former dancer and rehearsal director with the Mark Morris Dance Company, says that when working with a stage manager, it is critical for performers to know that the theatre is in good hands, through organization and constant communication, “letting them [the performers] know that you have it together, keeping the crew in line while leading them [the performers] as well.” This strong sense of leadership helps to create a well-grounded environment for the production, and a sense of security and trust for the performers and crew members.

Many textbooks, all of which are theatre focused, discuss characteristics of a good stage manager only in terms of the skills that were discussed in the last paragraph. *Stage Management: A Guidebook of Practical Techniques*, like most stage management books, dedicates a chapter to explaining what makes a “good” stage manager, and lists “Accepts responsibility, keep their cool, keep their mouths shut, eyes, ears open, think ahead, are considerate, keep their sense of

humor, are organized and efficient, and are punctual and dependable“ as the qualities that are sought after in a stage manager (Stern, p. 15). Notice that these qualities are rather skills and are focused solely on the technical aspects of the show with only a few mentions of people focused skills. At this point it may seem like stage management consists solely of learned skills, but there are also many character qualities that are necessary for success as well that are not often recognized in literature regarding the characteristics of a stage manager.

Empathy, adaptability, and a love of community and leadership are just a few of the qualities that everyone I interviewed acknowledged as necessary to be someone that is respected and loved within the performing arts management teams. Heather Olcott, stage manager for Dance Theater of Harlem in New York City with a BFA in dance, says that stage managing is about, “coming in everyday saying how can I make things better for everyone else?” Olcott also says that she looks at her work saying, “I’m here to help serve someone else. How can I do that?” This is focused on how you interact with people as well as how you prioritize and emphasize different aspects of the show, which could also be called a people focused approach, or a holistic approach.

Having a holistic approach rather than a technical approach is where these qualities such as empathy and love of community are found, says Kasson Marroquin, stage manager of Pilobolus Dance Company. Marroquin also says that, “being personable, being kind, being assertive and relaxed, are those things that people really latch onto, and especially in the performing arts, people find those qualities very comforting and very appealing. They make you feel like you can rely on that person.” Many of these are not able to be learned through coursework and experience, but rather are fostered in a community that also upholds the importance of these values and qualities from a young age. One specific community that nurtures

these holistic and empathetic qualities is the dance community, and although small, it is strong in the sense of belonging and togetherness that is so often overlooked by stage managers.

Dancers begin to learn the fundamental foundations that are key to the dance community from the very beginning and as a result, dance classes can teach much more than the technique that they are classified as. Classes such as improvisation and partnering, two of the most important courses for a dancers training and understanding of bodies and movement in space, also teach intuitive skills such as quick and creative problem solving, trust in a team, and collaboration. These classes also teach how to be both a leader and a follower with other moving bodies. Even though these two classes are meant to teach rudimentary skills such as how to lift and dance with other people, as well as the individual exploration of dance, they also require the dancers to be able to understand and utilize the intuitive skills stated above.

Dance is where I got my start in stage management and is the reason that I have this question of what it means to be a stage manager with the training of a dancer and performer, as well as what it means to be a dancer with the knowledge of being a stage manager. Entering college as a part of a dance department, I felt immense pressure to find success within performance and choreography focuses; however, the excitement for me came from being backstage and supporting the performers and choreographers through the technical aspects. This led me to questioning how I could utilize my years of dance training to help me in stage management and gain a different set of skills that are not seen in stage managers with other backgrounds.

The intuitive skills learned in dance, although not required for stage managing, help to set apart dancers working as stage managers by giving them embodied experiences through classes such as partnering and improvisation like mentioned above. Another value that is withheld in the

dance community that, although not necessary for stage managing, can help to elevate your career is punctuality. Everyone in the dance world has heard the mantra that “early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable.” From a very young age this is reinforced, and can be the difference in a stage manager arriving for a rehearsal a few minutes before the start, prepping as the performers and directors arrive, and a stage manager arriving early to prep the space for the rehearsal prior to the cast, crew, and director arriving. Due to my own personal experience of this expectation as a performer, I am able to have a better understanding of preparing prior and being ready before the start of the rehearsal.

The training of a dancer, although intense, is very rewarding, and the community that you become a part of teaches you so much more beyond dance technique. Susan Hadley, long time performer, choreographer, and dance educator as well as former professor and chair of the department of dance here at Ohio State, whom I have worked with both as her student and as her stage manager, discussed with me these values, expectations, and lessons that are learned through dance but outside of technique. When asked about how the dance community and embodied education supports this work, Hadley says that dance is collaborative and is constant problem solving while learning and figuring out how to work with others. This training and exploration of movement also gives us an intimate and vulnerable language around the body that allows us to take part in this collaboration both with our own bodies, as well as with other’s bodies and space. Greg Catellier, professor of dance at Emory University and former production manager at the Bates Dance Festival, says that the culture of dance is personal and is about gaining familiarity of bodies on a deeper level through physical contact and vulnerability with one another which leads to the artistry that makes up dance. Through these artistic endeavors and the foundational class work in dance training, you learn the values and qualities that are

fundamental to a dancer's success in stage management, setting them apart by showing a higher level of awareness of these skills, qualities, and values that are cultivated in dance, and at times desiderate in a production process.

Empathy, one of the qualities cultivated in dance, can mean many different things, but specifically in stage management it can be looked at as understanding and acknowledging the performers as people rather than just the show. Having a dance background is highly useful in the situations of understanding the performers. Olcott and Marroquin both discussed how having been in the shoes of every performer before, through recitals and performances throughout their dance careers, they are able to relate to what the performers go through before, during, and after each show. Because of this, Colvin Young says she is able to better advocate for what the performers need to be able to put their best forward, making sure that they have what they deserve. Colvin Young also states that, "a good stage manager understands that you are as much a part of the performance as the people on stage. So, I like to think that because I have that relationship with the stage myself as a performer, but also that I have the understanding of what it means to dance and be a part of the choreography, I just fold myself in as stage manager and take my position as one more part of the whole."

Understanding the dancers and pulling from your own experience as a performer allows you, as a stage manager, to better understand your role in supporting the needs of the production while also utilizing the empathetic and human connection emphasized in dance but still remaining objective in your leadership. Preparing for the BFA project showings has allowed me to reflect on what it means to have this overlap in passions by understanding the technical side of a production as well as the performer side. Throughout the past weeks of preparation there have been many instances when an understanding of the production elements would have allowed for

better communication from the dancers/choreographers, however it is the stage managers job to find the common language between the technical and artistic elements. Throughout that process I was finding how to communicate and how to support the performers/choreographers and their wants, and due to my own personal experience as a performer, although frustrating, I was able to understand their thought processes as they try to create the show that they desire in ways that were both satisfying for them, and possible for the production team. Having this understanding of technical production, the performers, as well as the movements, allowed for a more “people focused” style of management as Marroquin calls it, but it also aided in the actual cue calling of the show as well.

Being able to identify specific technical movements and understand what is happening within the body during them is a special skill that only the specific and detailed training of dance can support. Embodiment, although not necessary for stage managing, elevates and advances a stage manager’s ability to call a show. Colvin Young says that there is a physical reaction that occurs when a stage manager has a history in dance. Similarly, Catellier mentioned that you, “can’t underestimate the value of embodiment of dance.” By having an in-depth training and knowledge of the body, you have first-hand experience of what the movements not only look like, but what they feel like, and you are able to identify the peaks of movements. This makes it possible for you to “feel” says Marroquin. A stage manager with this embodied education of movement allows for a more confident and accurate ability to call cues knowing what they feel like rather than what they look like.

Throughout my time stage managing both past concerts, as well as the most recent BFA project showing, there have been many pieces that are improvisation based, and the cues have not always been music or movement-based cues. At times I have been asked to call a cue based

on a small detail within the movement such as both arms reaching into a “v” during the improvisation, specific spatial patterns, or even the emotions and sensations of the piece as they improvise through the movements. Having my dance background has been crucial in my success for these pieces as I have had to be aware of the details that are making up the movements, rather than the movements themselves. Some of the questions I have to ask myself and be aware of are: which way they are facing in the space, which arm is raised, exactly how far did they go in their spatial pattern, or have we reached the peak of the emotions, and is the intensity of the emotion shifting? These are all very important things to be able to ask and answer in the scenario of improvisation, and due to having been a performer, and having taken courses in improvisation, I feel well equipped to make these decisions on the spot and without a standby or warning to prepare.

Personal experiences with the movements also give the ability to identify small nuances and differences from performance to performance, due to the advanced understanding of the body and attention to detail. This understanding and awareness of details is second nature to Katie Houff, stage manager working with the Paul Taylor Dance Company with a BFA in dance. Like many dance programs, Houff learned the analysis of movement and bodies throughout her academic career, gaining skills in identifying the details and nuances of movement. Similarly, Hadley talks about the diverse and complex lenses of analysis that you are taught as a dancer through coursework such as movement analysis and labanotation, dance composition, and musical skills that “allows us to have a language around the body with personal experiences that train us to read and analyze the moving body through all types of lenses,” as well as encourages us to critique and look at more than just the movement and what is happening on the stage. This

dynamic analysis and understanding of movements also give way to a greater ability of specificity in communication between cast, crew, director, and designers.

The intersection of dance and technical production can often be seen in the detailed communication and leadership of the performers and crew. In dance, you are taught the importance of the minute details which can be beneficial as a stage manager when giving directions consisting of clear communication between the dancers and the crew, acting as a “middle man,” Colvin Young says, who has the languages that both the performers and crew understand. As a stage manager you are the filter of communication between people, and this attention to detail and specificity are the critical people skills, as Hadley says, that sets apart stage managers with a dance background. This advanced attention to detail remains evident even in the quick pace that dancers are accustomed to and is extremely valuable to the work. Going into the process of stage managing a show and still withholding that same level of attention to details is imperative to the success of a production. Specifically, oftentimes in dance, the stage manager is not brought into the process until the week of the show, and Marroquin says that being able to jump into a process quickly and communicate throughout the change has been a product of the years of dance training they have experienced. Many of the other stage managers shared this same sentiment, noting that due to the fast-paced nature of dancers constantly going from classes, to rehearsals, and then work, you learn to be able to jump from different environments “making it happen” as Colvin Young said. This ability to adapt to quick paced environments is one of the most impressive features of a dancer moving into stage management.

Adaptability is imperative, but this is not only shifting from place to place, constantly jumping from show or rehearsal process to the next, but also adapting the schedule and plan at a moment’s notice. Mariann Zennie, the stage manager for the State Theater of New Jersey and

former freelance dance stage manager with no dance training says that, oftentimes stage management is working with shifting sets of demands, and is often a question of time versus resources. This question of time and resources can cause you, as stage manager, to constantly make decisions that affect the entire cast and crew, and knowing how to communicate these changes is critical to the show's success. This is something that dancers are accustomed to, working in a large variety of rehearsal and performance spaces, while making decisions about choreography and constantly adapting to the circumstances available while making sure that everyone and everything is able to continue through the process.

While stage managing *The Nutcracker* this past December, I experienced this need and essential ability to adapt and creatively problem solve throughout the week as we ran into issues such as backdrops being too large, creating dressing rooms and a check in process that was safe, as well as adapting a concert venue created specifically for smaller rock bands, and transforming it into a stage appropriate for a ballet. The skills and foundations of my dance training were what allowed me to confidently understand the needs of the dancers and transform the space into a performance area that was safe and appropriate for the dancer's needs, as well as the needs of the camera for the live stream. The conditions and needs were constantly shifting, and as Zennie says, dancers are skilled and accustomed to just that. Dancers are inherently very creative thinkers and are constantly honing in on this skill through dance composition courses, improvisation, and partner work, and as a result, this quality that has been instilled in me enabled me to quickly problem solve and find solutions to issues that were safe, functional, and efficient.

Adapting to environments is only one of the ways that dancers excel as stage managers though. They are often met with the need to adapt the actual show mid-performance, something which all dancers are used to as we constantly shift to work with the circumstances at hand. At

the forefront of any production is the safety of the people involved and having dance training emphasizing adaptability and quick problem solving and decision making is imperative and one of the reasons that stage managers with a background in dance excel. Kasson Marroquin says that because of their dance training, they are able to adapt and jump into any situation or circumstance, diagnosing what the people need, and not just the show, again referencing back to the holistic approach of the people before the product that is fundamental to the culture of dance. One of the many roles of the stage manager includes calling the various cues of the show. By having the quick problem-solving skills and adaptability, the stage manager can help to ensure that the safety of the performers is maintained throughout the entirety of the show.

Being able to see differences and inconsistencies in the performance, you have the ability to see possible injuries and issues while the performers are still on stage that could affect the rest of the performance and coming cues. Colvin Young faced a situation such as this one evening and attributed her ability to make the quick decision and change placement of cues, adapting to the change in choreography to her background in dance. Many cues in dance are taken off of specific movements, and as Colvin Young experienced, sometimes these placements have to be adjusted to accommodate the performers and any conditions that could inhibit a normal run of the show. In Colvin Young's example, she talks about a light cue at the end of a long jumping sequence, but prior to that sequencing starting, she noticed the dancer whom she took the cue off of had not been jumping throughout the performance and knew that something was wrong. Due to her quick thinking and ability to notice and understand the shift in choreography for the dancer, she shifted the cue that was originally based on the specific jump and adapted to the situation to ensure that the show continued on. Colvin Young considers this as, "making small

adjustments,” and like many other stage managers, adapts what the focus needs to be, in order to manage more effectively throughout the show.

A dance training has value beyond the athleticism and the artistry that it strives for, but also builds character strengths and qualities that contribute to the success of stage managers who got their start through dance. Like seen above, all of the stage managers I interviewed found an exponential overlap between their dance training and the qualities that have helped lead them to success, agreeing that their dance training set them apart as stage managers. Lisa Dawn Cave, stage manager for countless Broadway productions, as well as former dancer with her BFA in dance from SUNY Purchase, said in an interview on *Projects with Jason*, that she took her years of former dance training with her throughout her career in stage management and it makes her the “fullest” that she is as a stage manager. Those that had no background in dance, such as Zennie, geared the conversations to focus on the technical aspects and focused on the production equally as the people, and although this can be helpful in remaining objective as a stage manager, the holistic approach that mirrors the values of the dance community provides a sense of safety and security that many performers need to trust the stage manager.

In conclusion, the experience and fundamental foundations that a dance training lays are utilized in stage management, and not only help to strengthen the skills and abilities learned on the job, but also provide them with a wider horizon of abilities and character qualities that are inherently valued in their work in the theatre on all types of productions. Buzz Cohen, stage manager for the Public Theatre in New York City, says that stage managing, specifically calling the cues of a performance is like “dancing with the production.” Stage managing is about finding the flow and the collaboration between artistry and technicality and melding these into one successful show. Dance, although not the only way to gain these skills, is based in this idea of

collaboration and from the beginning of dance training supports that partnership that is fundamental in the performing arts.

Appendix A: Interviews

Colvin Young, Kristin. Personal Interview. 13 October 2020.

Hadley, Susan. Personal Interview. 2 December 2020.

Olcott, Heather. Personal Interview. 6 October 2020.

Marroquin, Kasson. Personal Interview. 12 October 2020.

Catellier, Greg. Personal Interview. 14 January 2021.

Houff, Katie. Personal Interview. 8 October 2020.

Zennie, Mariann. Personal Interview. 12 January 2021.

Cohen, Buzz. Personal Interview. 17 September 2020.

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"Tech Table-Lisa Dawn Cave, Stage Manager." YouTube, uploaded by *Projects with Jason*.

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